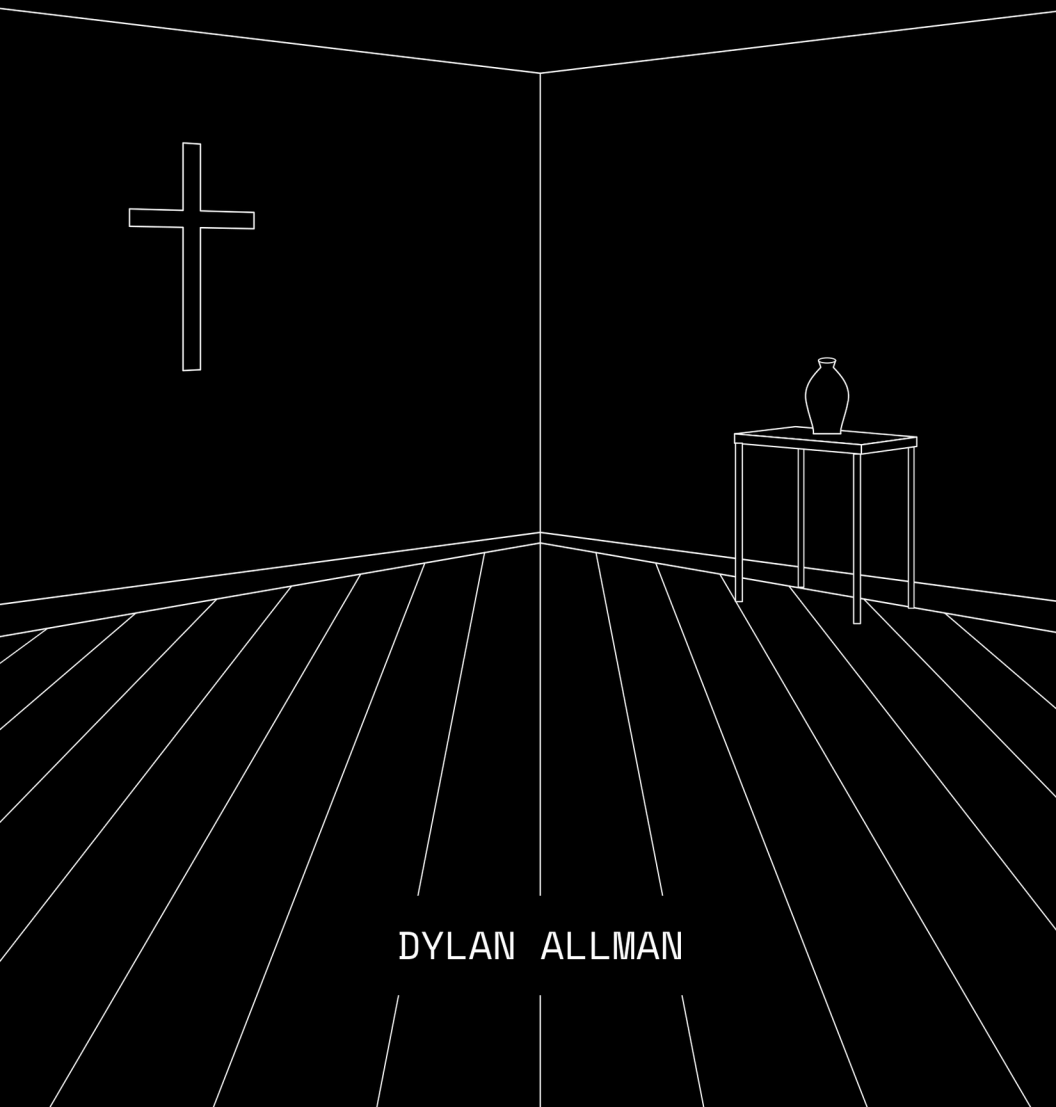
THE WINDOWLESS ROOM

ON THE UNINTELLIGIBILITY OF THEISM



DYLAN ALLMAN

THE WINDOWLESS ROOM

THE WINDOWLESS ROOM

On the Unintelligibility of Theism

DYLAN ALLMAN

THE WINDOWLESS ROOM
On the Unintelligibility of Theism

First edition, 2026

To the extent possible under law, Dylan Allman has waived all copyright and related or neighboring rights to this work. It is dedicated to the public domain under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal dedication. Copy it, quote it, translate it, sell it, give it away.

No rights reserved.
creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0

Dialogue in this book is unquoted.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Allman, Dylan, author.
Title: The windowless room : on the unintelligibility of theism.
Classification: BL200.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same?

Satan, in *Paradise Lost*

CONTENTS

PREFACE vi

1. The Room 1

2. The Window 20

3. The Instruments 32

4. The Readings 47

5. The Kneeling 61

6. The Room, Known 78

PREFACE

Imagine you live in a room with no windows. These walls are the whole of what you get. Everything you have ever known you found in here. Now someone tells you there's a maker on the far side of the wall, and all you have to do is look. So you picture a window. Every piece of it comes off these walls. The frame, the glass, the little latch, scavenged from the only room you have. And the thing you imagine on the other side, the maker, the outside, the real, you build that out of in-here too. You take what surrounds you, shuffle it, and call it new. The view is inside. So is the window. There is no looking out, because there is nothing to look through and nothing on the other side that didn't come from this side first.

People ask what it would take for me to believe in God. They think the answer is some argument I haven't heard yet, or some experience that would finally tip me over. They don't grasp how far off the question actually lands. Theism isn't simply unconvincing to me. It's unintelligible. Asking me to believe is like being handed a fork and told to eat fraud. The sentence is grammatical. There is nothing on the plate.

Whatever anyone reaches for to confirm a god is the same kind of instrument, no matter which one they name. Each is the mind reporting on itself and selling the report as news from outside. The contact never happens. It cannot happen. These instruments do not point out. They only point back in. Everything that reaches you has already passed through an apparatus, the equipment you perceive through. Your senses, and the nervous system wired behind them. Light and sound and pressure arrive at the edge of you as raw signal, and that signal is converted and built into experience by your brain before you are ever aware it happened. The machinery that builds your world for you never hands you the world. It

hands you its rendering, cut to its own specifications, and the rendering is the only place you have ever stood.

Any instrument you raise to confirm a god is part of that same machinery. It is the apparatus running, and what it hands back are models. Fictions the system writes and then reads back to itself as fact. A model cannot verify that it matches an outside. To check it you would have to stand next to the outside and hold the two of them side by side, and you never arrive there. You get more model. So the instrument returns certainty, and the certainty feels like contact, and it never was.

That is the surface theism is asked to land on, and it isn't there. There is no edge. There is no window that can be built, no outside I could sketch with anything but the furniture in here, and whatever is past the wall, if anything is, only ever reaches me as more wall. So when you ask what would make me believe, listen to what you're actually requesting. You want me to look through a window that can't exist, at an outside I could only ever furnish with pieces of this room, and then kneel to what I see. I can't hand you the reason that would move me. There's no spot out there for a reason to stand.

Then I'm asked, what do you have to lose? As if I can simply choose to believe. I have everything to lose. Everything. I have one life. It is the only thing I am sure of. If I take that, the single confirmed thing I will ever hold, and pour it out in service to something I cannot test, cannot reach, cannot even build in my head without scavenging this same room for parts, then I have spent the one real thing I had on a shape I drew on the inside of the wall. The believer thinks the bet is cheap because he counts the cost as a little lost time. The cost is the life. The only one I can prove I have, handed to a thing whose existence I could never confirm.

There is a reason religions tend to converge on similar structures. They're all pulling from the same interior for parts. A maker, a moral order, an afterlife, a set of commands. Of course those recur. There's only one room to draw on, so the outputs rhyme. If their methods of discovery actually reached an outside, they would converge on the content, not just the shape. Aim ten reliable instruments at the same object and they agree on what it is. Aim them at God and they return flatly incompatible answers about his nature, his demands,

what he did, what he wants, what happens after. Same claimed instrument, same claimed target, irreconcilable readings. That's what it looks like when nothing is being measured and each one is reading and externalizing its own interior.

Every one of them asserts the reliability of the method while the method is visibly producing contradiction. A thermometer that gave a different number every time you trusted it would be called broken. These give a different god every time and each tradition calls its own the truth.

THE WINDOWLESS ROOM

1. The Room

You have never met light. Light stops at the back of your eye. What continues inward is an electrochemical pulse running down a nerve, and that pulse looks nothing like what it reports. The same is true of sound. A pressure wave is simply air shoving more air. The wave dies at your eardrum. Past that point there is only the pulse again, the same blind clicking, whether the source was a violin or a gunshot or your own name. Inside the skull it is dark and it is silent. Everything you have ever seen or heard was assembled in that darkness by tissue that has never once been outside it.

Every nerve fires the same way, a brief electrical spike, and one spike is shaped like the next whether it began in the eye, the ear, or the skin. The flash of a candle and the

blare of a horn enter the dark as the same kind of event on different wires. Nothing in the signal itself says light, or says sound. Signals that reach the seeing part of the brain are seen. Signals that reach the hearing part are heard. It is one kind of event throughout, and only the address differs, which is why some people, wired slightly off, taste words or see the colors of sounds. The brain is reading its own cables and building a sensation to fit the one it thinks it is holding.

So the world you live in is a build. The best model you have says light is wavelength, a number, and red is your apparatus's verdict on the number. Sweetness is its verdict on a molecule. Pain is its verdict on damage, which is why the verdict can fire with no damage at all, in a limb amputated years ago, aching in a hand that is no longer there.

The eye samples the incoming light with three kinds of detector, each answering to a broad band of wavelengths, and those three bands are only a sliver of what arrives. What falls outside them simply never enters, and you have no experience of its absence. Everything you will ever call color is the brain's summary of how

hard those three are firing relative to one another. So two lights with nothing physically in common, a single pure wavelength on one side and a mixture of others that contains none of it on the other, can strike the three detectors in the same proportions and arrive as the identical color though out there they share nothing. A pigeon runs a fourth detector, and the same light that gives you one color gives it two. You never saw the light. You saw a three-way verdict on the light, and any two lights that round to the same verdict collapse into one. The color was manufactured in here. It was always in here.

Try to imagine a color you have never seen.

Not a shade. Not a mix. A new one, off the wheel entirely, unrelated to the palette you own, the way red is unrelated to a trumpet blast. Close your eyes and produce it.

Watch what happens instead. A blue arrives with something wrong in it. A green pushed until it hums. Something coppery, something bruised. A funky-looking violet. Every candidate walks in wearing pieces of the old palette.

None of it is built for accuracy. A creature does not need a faithful picture. It needs to do the right thing about what is arriving, quickly, and a rough serviceable cartoon that drives the right move beats a faithful transcript that comes in too late to use. So the whole apparatus was filed down, across an immense line of ancestors who died whenever their filing was wrong, to deliver traction rather than truth.

Pain is an order, issued by the brain, to stop and guard the part it has judged to be in danger, and because it is an order it can be dialed up when you are frightened, dialed down when there is something worse to survive, switched off in the wounded soldier who feels nothing until the fighting ends. The cut you do not notice until you see the blood, and then it starts hurting. The stubbed toe that is worse three seconds later, once you are already limping. The ankle that holds up fine on the walk home and turns unusable the moment you sit down. The feeling was a lever, pulled to move you. Every channel you own works this way. Made to function.

There is a hole in each of your eyes where the optic nerve exits, wide enough to lose a lemon held at arm's

length, and you have never seen either hole, because the apparatus paints over them with its best guess. Several times a second your eyes jerk from one point to another, and during each jerk the feed is a useless smear, so the apparatus cuts it, and splices the gap, and you do not notice the cut.

Stand at a mirror, close, and look from your own left eye to your own right and back again. The eyes are clearly moving. You will not once see them move. A person beside you sees the jump every time. You get a smooth unbroken face, because the smear during the jump is thrown out before it ever reaches you and the two clean stills are stitched across the gap. You were handed continuity instead, because continuity is the more useful story.

From the instant light lands on the eye to the instant you see is roughly a tenth of a second, and a tenth of a second is the gap between catching the glass and hearing it shatter on the floor. A creature that perceived the true present, faithfully, would be living in the past, forever a beat behind the ball and the branch and the thing with teeth. So the apparatus uses the incoming signal to

compute where the world must have moved to by now and shows you that, stamped as the present moment. When you catch something thrown at you, your hand did not go to where you saw the object. It went to where the model placed the object a fraction of a second on, and the model was right. It is the same machinery that drops you for that half-step when the stair is not where the forecast set it. Push a door that turns out to be unlatched and you stumble into the room. Your body did not wait to find out. It committed, in advance, to a room it had already modeled.

In sleep the senses are shut off at the gate. The eyes stop reporting, the ears stop reporting, the feed goes dark at the door, and the world-builder, cut loose from every input, keeps running. You go to sleep and the apparatus keeps building. Rooms you have never entered. Faces with pores and stubble and grief in them. Conversations, weather, gravity, dread. All of it manufactured from nothing but stored material, with the sensors dark, and while it runs you do not suspect a thing. You have argued with people who were made of you. You have run from things that were you. Some mornings you have woken up

mourning someone who never existed, and the grief took time to drain, because the grief was real.

My apparatus has never fully honored the off switch. I have been a sleepwalker and a sleep-talker my whole life, the kind of sleeper other people tell stories about in the morning, and the dreams that come with it run uncomfortably vivid. Stress turns the projector up. The worst weeks of my life have always been followed by the strangest nights. In basic training I once came to standing at my wall locker in the dark, socks on concrete, hands already working, fully inside a dream that I was late for formation. The dream had built the bay around me. Same bunks, same floor cleaner smell, same gray light, rendered so faithfully that waking changed almost nothing. The unsupplied build and the supplied one were the same room.

The night before a trip I woke my wife in the middle of the night, standing in the kitchen with a box of ziplock bags, explaining in clear and reasonable English that I could not sleep and was getting ahead on the packing. I even knew what time it was and assured her I was not sleepwalking. She was astounded the next morning to

learn I had no memory of any of it. My senses were shut off at the gate. The build still kept the time, held a reason, and answered well enough to send her back to sleep, and hers were not shut off at all.

These are the mechanics of having a head. You have never been outside the render. Not once, not for a second, not at your birth and not at your most awake. Every sunset, every equation, every face you have loved, every word of every scripture ever pressed into your hands arrived as an in-house production of the dark, wet studio behind your eyes. The studio has no door. Nothing gets in except signal, and signal is the world already translated, already dead on arrival and reanimated in a costume. That studio is the room. You were born in it, you will die in it, and every thought you have ever had was assembled inside it, including every thought about what might stand past its walls. And the room comes furnished.

A memory is not a recording. It is a re-render, rebuilt on demand from compressed notes, and every rebuild edits. Details migrate. Faces swap. Whole scenes get furniture from other scenes, and the splice is invisible, the

same way the eye's blind spot is invisible. You have memories right now, vivid ones, confident ones, that never happened the way you hold them. The past you consult is a set the apparatus keeps re-dressing. Pull up a memory of walking into work. Most people find they can see themselves doing it, from a few feet back, from an angle no eye of theirs ever was. Nobody recorded that. It was rebuilt, and the figure in it was placed there.

When you pull a memory up, you rebuild it, and the rebuild is what gets stored again, tinted by today's mood and salted with what you have learned since, written back over the copy you had. The memories you return to most often are therefore the worst preserved you own, handled and overwritten a little more each time, drifting further from the event with every visit.

I owned one of these for years about the church I grew up in. I would have sworn the sanctuary windows were plain, frosted panes. Then I saw a photo online. There is stained glass, red and gold all down the walls, and there always was. I sat in that room hundreds of times. Somewhere across a decade the apparatus took the color out, and I never caught it happening, because each

rebuild only had to match enough with the one before it. The version I remember was built later.

A concept is a compression of renders. You met four legs and a flat top enough times and the apparatus filed the pattern and stamped it "table." Higher abstractions are compressions of compressions. Counting started in fingers and pebbles and notches cut into bone, and only later did anyone treat quantity as a thing in itself, weightless, with no fingers attached. It never actually came loose. It floats above experience the way a kite floats above a hand. There is a string.

Language is a crate of handles. A word is a tag wired to a cluster of renders, and the wiring is the whole of what it means. Say "cinnamon" and whatever you have of cinnamon comes up, the smell if you have it, the kitchen, the color, the fact that it goes in some things and not others. Say "shame" and the word arrives already carrying every time you have felt it. Now take hold of a handle with nothing on the other end. It has the same weight in the mouth and the same place in a sentence. Nothing comes up. Nothing is lifted. The crate looks the same either way.

What is the feeling of being someone? There is a sense of a watcher behind your eyes, a little way back from the face, the one receiving all this. A body has to keep one set of books. Which limbs are mine to move, which damage is mine to feel, which of yesterday's promises are mine to keep, and a creature that cannot tell its own hand from the branch does not last. So the apparatus keeps a running character, something to file the reports under and forecast from, threaded out of the signals that never stop arriving, the floor under you, the position of your joints, the heartbeat, and stitched to yesterday's version each morning. Then it reads its own model and calls the reading "me." Look for the watcher and you cannot get behind it to check. It is inside the frame, painted in the same pass as the floor and the light.

Hide one of your hands and set a fake hand in front of you where a hand would sit. Have someone brush both at once, the hidden real one and the visible fake, same strokes, same places, same time. Inside a minute the rubber hand starts to feel like yours. Move to strike it and you flinch to protect it. The edge of you, which feels like the hardest fact you have, is a live computation. The

brain is running on the evidence in front of it, and if you feed it staged evidence the edge moves.

This closes an exit people like to imagine. There is no clean little self perched outside the machinery, receiving its output, capable of stepping around it for a better view. The one who would do the stepping is made of the machinery's output. Every vantage is inside. Every tool is inventory. Every thought you will ever think is assembled, on site, from stock.

Imagination is recombination. What has never come through the apparatus cannot be summoned by the apparatus, and every attempt to summon it produces a composite of what has come through, only wearing a costume and answering to a new name. Scale changes nothing. Make the hallway a trillion miles long. It is still a hallway. Take a lifespan and cut the brakes and call it eternity. You stretched a duration. Duration is stock too. Take power and remove every ceiling and call it omnipotence. You inflated an experience of strength, of doors opening when pushed. The balloon is enormous now, and it is still made of balloon.

Now hold the word "God" and think about what you are actually holding.

A father, enlarged. A king, enlarged. A mind, with the body quietly erased. Light, but the light off these walls. Watchfulness, but the watchfulness you felt from a parent. Authority, wrath, mercy, majesty. Every ingredient is off a shelf you can name, and most of them are off shelves stocked before you could talk.

Mine came off a shelf. A small church, a VeggieTales tape in the VCR, and God was the figure from every illustrated children's Bible, the white robe, the white beard, the father scaled up. Heaven was clouds and pearly gates, and for some reason Jesus stood outside them at a podium. God's voice was a deep one I felt in the chest. Nobody at home ever unpacked any of this. It arrived as an assumed fact, God is watching you, God made you special and he loves you very much, say your prayers, and mine hung framed beside my bed and I said it every night. And he saw everything, the way Santa saw everything.

Open your hand. It is only holding furniture.

If everything is a render, then the stove and the cliff and the bridge are renders too, and the whole thing seems

to eat the world. Why trust the model of traffic and not the model of God. If it is rooms all the way down, anything goes, right?

Anything does not go, and the room itself is why.

The room has weather. Push on the render and it pushes back, and it pushes back in patterns that do not care what you prefer. Believe whatever you want about the stove. The render of your hand will blister. Take the cliff as a suggestion and the render will conclude you, promptly and without appeal. Nobody consulted you about these regularities. You cannot vote them down or dream them off. The render is a build, and it is also a build with rules that hold whether or not you accept them.

Mine came on an overpass north of Dallas, the winter the ice arrived early. Nothing about the road looked different. Same gray, same lane, same speed I had held for miles, and the model I was driving on said the surface would keep doing what surfaces do. Then the wheel went light in my hands. That is the part I still remember, a sudden absence of connection, the car no longer taking instructions. It came around slowly. The rail slid across the windshield where the lane should have been, and

then the lane, and then the rail again, and I had time to notice how quiet it was, everything happening at a speed that let me watch it. I was steering the entire time. It made no difference at all. Two seconds, and then the car set itself down facing the wrong way and stopped, and the rail had chosen not to be involved. I sat on the shoulder afterward with my hands doing their own shaking, and I have never again confused what I wanted with what the road was going to do.

A model earns its keep by predicting the weather. The stove-model says touch it and there will be pain. You touch it. There is pain. The bridge-model is thousands of predictions about load and steel, and every car that crosses is another one coming true. Even the strange deep models, the particles no one has ever seen, earn their keep the same way. The electron is a model that pays spectacular rent. Flip the switch, the light comes on, the model collects.

At no point did anyone hold the model up against an unrendered original to check the likeness. Nobody can. What we have instead, what we have only ever had, is models graded against further render, prediction against

arrival, checked again in every other head that cares to run the test, and the whole cathedral of human knowledge, every medicine and machine and mathematics, is built out of exactly that and nothing else. When people say "true," this grading is the thing that has been doing the work all along. Truth, as actually practiced by anyone who ever used it, is a performance record inside the room.

Science keeps its standing, because science keeps paying. Engineering keeps its standing every time the bridge holds. The distinction between the surgeon and the quack holds because the room grades them differently and writes the grades in survival rates. Models are all we have and they are certainly not equal.

I call this arrangement a truce. I cannot verify the render against an outside. I cannot certify my senses with my senses. I cannot prove that tomorrow will rhyme with today without borrowing tomorrow to do it, and I cannot vouch for logic without using logic to draft the voucher. Nobody can. So I operate on terms. Working credit extended to the models that pay, revoked from the ones that default, everything open to revision. The truce

owes nobody an account of why the patterns hold. That they hold, and keep holding, is the operating condition.

Every human alive signs this truce, the believer included. He checks traffic both ways. He tests the ice before his child walks on it. He grades models from dawn to dark like everyone else and calls none of it faith. Then he takes that word faith, spends it on the one account that can never be graded, turns to me and says, see, you believe things too, we are the same. We are not the same. And he knows it. Ask him whether faith is nothing more than reasonable trust, the chair holding, the ice bearing weight, and he will refuse. A faith that is only good evidence is faith diluted to nothing, no virtue in it, no test, nothing left to reward. He needs the word to mean a reach past all the evidence there is, aimed at the external, the way his God is external. It is surrender, and he would not want it any other way. The surrender is the virtue. The surrender is what gets rewarded.

A truce is not a surrender. Provisional credit inside the room is not assent to a sentence aimed past every possible payment, and his move depends on the filing, one ungradeable commitment slipped into the ledger among

ten thousand graded entries, hoping the page turns before anyone reads the line.

Notice the standing of everything I have told you. The nerves, the three detectors, the lag, the splices, the rewritten memories. None of it was read off the world directly, because nothing is. It was measured with instruments that are themselves renders, by eyes that edit, by brains describing brains. It reached me as one more render. It reaches you now the same way. Every piece of this account was built in here, from what was already in here.

Everything I have said stands as a model among models, a citizen of the room like the stove and the bridge, kept because it predicts, demoted the day it stops. Test it like anything else. Rig the mirror. Hide the hand. Throw the ball. The claims pay rent or they go. The map of the studio was drawn in the studio, it could not have been drawn anywhere else, and it asks to be graded like everything else drawn in here. And if the tools were filed for traction rather than truth, that includes the reasoning on these pages. Nothing here asks for trust. It asks to be

run, graded, and kept only while it pays, which is the only warrant any human thought has ever had.

But there are two kinds of claims. There are claims built to be graded. Unicorns can be looked for and not found, and being false is a respectable thing for a claim to be. And then there is a different kind, aimed on purpose past all possible weather. One about what stands beyond every render there could ever be, engineered so that no arrival could ever grade it, so that nothing inside the room could count for or against it even in principle. Its defenders present this as its glory. Too high for the weather. Above the grading. They have misread their own design.

2. The Window

Theism is not claiming a very large alien. A being of tremendous power, floating somewhere in the room, older than the galaxies and able to bend them, would be a creature. Astonishing, worth studying, worth fearing maybe, and entirely a citizen of the room, a thing among things, arriving through the same apparatus as cats and dogs. Claims about such a being would be gradeable in principle. Where is it? What does it emit? What does it move? You could mount a search. Searches like that have been running for as long as instruments have existed, and every corridor they have cleared has been empty. No serious believer worships a big alien. Press one, and watch him recoil from the idea with more force than I would.

The actual product label says the maker of all things, who is not among the things made. Beyond space. Beyond time. Not the largest object in the world but the reason there is a world, no resident of the room, categorically outside. The traditions insist on this. It is their proudest specification, recited in the creeds, defended in the seminaries, wielded against every skeptic who ever showed up asking why the telescope keeps coming back empty. You cannot find him in the room, the believer says, because he is not the kind of thing that is in rooms.

Taken at his word. A being outside all possible experience, and, on top of that, a relationship with it. Knowledge of it. Contact. The claim is that the outside has been reached, that it speaks, that it wants, that it watches, that a channel is open between the far side of every wall and the inside of your chest.

Hold both halves in view at once. Categorically beyond the apparatus. Personally in touch. Then go back to the room and build the window again.

You want an opening onto the outside, so you picture an opening. Every opening you have ever encountered

was a rendered gap in a rendered surface, a doorway, a mouth, a tear in fabric, and the picture you produce now is assembled from those. Next the glass, something to see through, water and air and windshields. Now hang the assembly on the wall. The window faces the wrong way. It has to. It always will. What you have built is a picture of a window, rendered by the apparatus, hanging inside the render, and the "through" it promises is painted on. Look through it. Go ahead. What appears in the glass is more render, because the glass is render, because the looking is render.

Now try to do better, and paint the view itself, the actual far side. Reach for your materials. Vastness. You compressed it out of night skies and long water, all of it in-house. Light. In-house. A presence, a mind, a watching warmth. In-house, in-house, in-house, scavenged from parents and rooms and the feeling of eyes on your back. You cannot draw the far side of the wall. You can only draw a wall and write "far side" underneath it.

Someone will say the picture is not the point, the word is the point. "God" refers. Words reach past their pictures

all the time, past the speaker, out to the thing itself. So ask how a word gets hold of anything. Trace one in the room. "Cup" pulls up the weight of one in the hand, the heat through the side, the hundred you have picked up without thinking. However that comes to you, it came in through the apparatus. Follow any word you own down to what it is fastened to and you land in the same place, in experience. There is no other anchorage. A word is a kite, and every string runs down into the room, because string is made of room.

Now do the same with "God." Whatever comes up, and plenty does, every fiber of it is interior. The word grips its pictures magnificently and its pictures hang inside the wall, and there is no second string running from the syllable out past all possible render to hook the thing itself. What would that string be made of? Every rope you own was braided in here.

For the sentence "God exists" to carry the meaning its speaker intends, the concept "God" must reach something categorically outside all experience. Concepts are built from experience. They have no other material. A concept built from inside materials is an inside object,

whatever label it wears, and its reference extends exactly as far as its materials do, which is to the walls. The reaching-past never occurs. Because the reach is made of room, and room does not extend past room.

There is a tradition that answers this by moving the concept's origin. The idea of God was never built from experience, it says. It was installed, planted in every human at the factory by the maker himself, which is why it feels like a memory. An installed concept would still sit in the inventory as one more piece of stock, and so would anything the apparatus was born holding. Factory stock is still stock. Its claimed ancestry is a label reading planted from outside, and a concept cannot testify to its own origin. And an installed universal sense ought to read the same everywhere. It does not.

The failure is not in the believing. The failure is upstream of belief, in the assembly. The sentence never finishes becoming a claim. It is grammatical, fluent, ancient, set to music, carved over doorways, and it never says anything.

But the sentence does not feel empty. It feels like the fullest sentence there is. So distinguish two things:

familiarity and intelligibility. A phrase drilled into you from age three feels transparent the way your own house's smell is invisible to you. You have hummed it, sung it, prayed it. The test is not whether the phrase feels meaningful. Every phrase you grew up inside feels meaningful. The test is whether it can be cashed, and every attempt to cash this one pays out in more furniture.

Some sentences assemble fine and fail at grading. "There are unicorns." Every part is stock, horse plus horn, the concept snaps together in a second, the room gets searched, nothing answers the description, the sentence is false. False is honorable. The claim was built well enough to be wrong. Some sentences die of contradiction. "The four-sided triangle in my pocket." The parts are stock but they cancel on contact, and everyone can feel the little logical click of a shape refusing itself.

Some sentences fail a third way. The parts are stock, they do not contradict, they assemble into something, and the something is not what the sentence needed. "God," assembled honestly, completes into a composite of interior stock wearing an "outside" label, and the label

is the one part that never fastens to anything. Just a sentence-shaped object with no proposition inside it, and the emptiness is silent, which is why it has survived.

The famous positions all stand a step above this failure.

The atheist comes in two strengths. The milder kind asserts nothing and merely lacks the belief, and I will get to him. The positive kind says the sentence is false. To call a sentence false you must first get it to say something. Falsehood is a verdict, and verdicts require a defendant. This atheist has spent centuries dignifying the sentence with exactly the content it lacks, prosecuting an empty chair with real passion, and the debate stayed alive precisely because both sides agreed on the one thing neither should have granted, that something had been claimed.

The milder atheist is closer to me and still one courtesy over the line. Lack of belief takes an object. You can only withhold assent from a proposition, so his shrug quietly files the sentence as a claim, just an unpersuasive one, something a person could believe that he happens not to. He thinks he has made the minimal move.

The agnostic is more careful and still too generous. Unknown, he says, unknowable even, filing the question in the drawer of things sealed from us. But a sealed drawer implies a document inside. The agnostic's humility pictures a fact out past the wall, determinate, waiting, merely unreachable, and that picture is built from the same stock as the believer's throne. It feels like the honest position. It is the honest answer to a different situation, the one where a real question exceeds our reach. Plenty of questions do. This one never finished forming, and you cannot be humble toward a syntax error.

I rested there for years, once the anger of my first unbelief had burned off. Agnosticism felt like the adult room in the house. Just a clean shrug with good posture, and I would have told you it was the only honest position on the market. Then I started noticing what I was doing when I said it. Every time I said unknowable, somewhere in the back of the shop the apparatus was quietly picturing the envelope, sealed, addressed, waiting past the wall. My modesty had furniture in it. The step below

was noticing that the drawer I kept being humble about had never been built.

So take the last step down. Unformed.

I am not offering a third opinion about the far side of the wall. I have no opinion about the far side of the wall, and neither do you, and neither does the pope, because opinions are made of concepts and no concept survives the trip. The report is a manufacturing failure, upstream of every verdict. There is nothing before the court. The two ancient armies, believers and deniers, have been contesting the ownership of a plate that was empty the whole time, and the agnostics have been standing between them, gravely declaring the plate's contents beyond our knowing.

God is beyond comprehension, the believer says, no mind can grasp him, and he says it with pride. Take him at his word again. If the concept cannot be formed, then his scripture, his personal relationship, every sentence of it, is conducted with the unformed. You cannot correspond with a vacancy. He has mistaken the failure of the assembly for the grandeur of the target, read the empty plate as a feast too rich to see, and then gone right

on describing the feast. What God wants. What God forbids. Whom God prefers. The incomprehensible turns out to have detailed opinions about diet and property and what two people do in bed. The mystery is total until the collection plate comes around, and then the specifications arrive.

A sharp believer will counter that my entire thesis speaks of the outside. Outside the apparatus, beyond the render, past all possible experience. That I have used the phrase on every page. If the concept cannot be formed, my position cannot be formed. To declare the wall impassable I must have seen both sides of it.

The sharpest version I have taken came from a friend I grew up with. When we were brand new adults he was the atheist and I was the one still holding scraps of faith, and his questions helped walk me the rest of the way out. He has since gone all the way back in, devout, sacramental, and now the questions run the other direction. He put this one to me across a table in the cafeteria. You have written a map of a place you claim no map can show. Then he sat back, because he knew it was good.

Ask what lies north of the North Pole. The words are fine. Each one is stocked, the grammar holds, and a listener can even feel a picture start, some gray territory further up. Then the picture aborts, because "north" is defined by the pole and cannot outrun its own definition, and the phrase is revealed as a construction that fails. And I just used the phrase. I said "north of the North Pole" and no polar country flashed into being to make my sentence meaningful. Using a broken phrase to point at its own breakage does not repair it.

That is the status of "outside the room" in every line here. When I say the outside cannot be thought, I am not thinking the outside and reporting back from it. I am reporting that the construction fails, every time, in a specific and repeatable way, and the report is manufactured entirely in-house, out of watching the failure happen. The failure is an interior event. I have excellent access to interior events. They are the only events I have access to.

Which is why the case keeps arriving as exercises. I am not describing the far side and asking you to trust me. I am handing you a stone and asking you to feel it not

open. The demonstration runs in your workshop, with your inventory. Whatever fails, fails in you, where you can watch it.

The room itself is a picture, and pictures leak. A real room has an outside, because a real room sits inside a larger render, and so the metaphor smuggles in the geography the argument denies. I know. Every metaphor for this predicament will leak the same way, because metaphors are furniture and furniture comes walled. The room is scaffolding. Climb it, see the point, and then take it down. What remains is what happened when you tried it yourself. The color would not come. The window faced in. That does not need a metaphor to hold it up.

3. The Instruments

A book arrives claiming revelation from beyond the wall. It lives as sentences, and sentences arrive through the apparatus like everything else, rendered in the reading, in-house by the time you are aware of them. Ink can say anything. A letter that swears it came from outside the postal system still came to your mailbox, and the swearing is part of the letter. There is no stamp from beyond, because stamps are stock, and a page asserting its own exteriority is exactly as heavy as any other page. It weighs one page. A hundred pages vouching for one another weigh a hundred pages.

The Bible turned into just another document for me in Army basic training, of all places. The rule was that you could keep no book in the bay except scripture. So I

had a friend mail me an edition of the *Skeptic's Annotated Bible*, the whole text intact with every contradiction, every atrocity, every impossible number flagged in the margins ahead of time. It passed inspection. It was a Bible. And on Sunday afternoons, while the devout held Bible study at one end of the bay, I held what I can only call anti-Bible study at the other. That was the first time I read it the way you read anything else. Two authors disagreeing about a census. A story patched over an older story. Ink, making claims about ink.

What about the inner voice, the believer asks. Something seems to happen. The presence in the room, the dissolving of the self at the third hour of prayer, the certainty that arrives and outranks every argument. I do not doubt the events. I ask where they occur. They occur as experience, which is to say, as render, and intensity is a property of renders. The apparatus that builds your quiet Tuesday builds your burning bush with the same tools, just at a higher setting, and you already know it owns those settings, because the settings have knobs. Fast for nine days. Drum at the right tempo. Kneel until your knees throb, breathe wrong on purpose, take the right

molecule, skip the right amount of sleep. The presence arrives on schedule, in every tradition, under every theology.

Suppose that something beyond did cause the experience. The experience still could not point back to it. An effect carries no likeness of what caused it. Whatever you reach for to identify the source is another experience, more render, and it inherits the same blindness. The mystic's certainty is one more interior event reporting on interior events. It is the mind's oldest maneuver, the report on itself sold as news from outside. Sold hardest, it turns out, to the reporter.

The believer may say that it was never about religion. Religion is the building, the politics. What he has is a relationship. I grew up on that distinction and spent years repeating it, and it feels like an escape because it is aimed at everything worth escaping. But think about the relationship. The name he addresses. The attributes he credits. The way he recognizes God's voice against his own, the tests he runs, what a silence means, what a coincidence means, the very words for doubt. None of it was born with him. It was issued, every piece, and the

relationship cannot be conducted for one minute without it. And when his private sense of him collides with someone else's, he reaches for a verse, a pastor, and there is the institution again, called in to referee. Refuse the referee, insist your reading alone is final, and you are still standing on the tradition that told you which book counts and how to read it. There is no unmediated line. The relationship is a branch of the tree it claims to have outgrown. Climb as high as you like. It is the same tree.

Every summer of my childhood ran through a church camp, and every camp had a night the kids themselves called "Cry Night." They would wait for dark, bring the lights down, put the band on something slow and minor, and a leader with a trained and breaking voice would walk us into it. And it worked. It worked every single year. The crying would move through the room, and the voice at the front would say, you feel that? That is the Holy Spirit. What I felt was enormous, awe and belonging in one current, and underneath it a pressure to feel it, because everyone was feeling it and the feeling was the point of the night. One year I fell asleep during the build and woke at the peak, and what I felt was not the

Spirit but the misery of having missed him, which should have told me something about what was being manufactured. By the next afternoon we were playing dodgeball and the visitation had evaporated entirely.

Grief builds beliefs. Terror builds them. A mind under unbearable load will manufacture whatever belief discharges the load, and it does the work below the floor of awareness and hands the result up the way it hands up color. Coping builds. Trauma builds. And there are illnesses that do nothing but manufacture voices where the apparatus generates speech out of thin air. The equipment that would receive a voice and the equipment that generates one are the same equipment.

My own father once told me, as a hope, that maybe his death would hurt me badly enough to bring me to God. He was hoping that grief would build in me what persuasion had not, and the terrible thing is that he might be right, because that is what grief can do. My father, a believer his whole life, was betting on the machinery.

My grandmother died not long ago. I was closer to her than to almost anyone. I know she is dead. I have known it every day since, and I do not feel it, not the way

knowing usually feels. The fact sits there, true and inert. She left everything to my mother and my aunt, and I was told to pick a thing for myself. I chose a ring nobody in the family knew anything about. I spent weeks on it after that, working backward through marks and records and old documents, and what came out was a line of people I had not known I came from. It was the best thing I had turned up in years, and the whole time I worked I was eager to give her a call like I always did. I would find something new and reach for the phone.

And here is what I actually feel, some nights, underneath everything I know. That I will get to tell her. The whole thing, start to finish, and she will be delighted the way she was always delighted. I am not resisting belief. I want it deeply. I would take it over every argument in this book if wanting worked that way. But the wanting is the whole explanation for why it is there. Grief built a reunion in me, the way it builds one in almost anybody who has lost a person they could not afford to lose, and being the most natural thing I have ever felt does not make it the least bit true.

A man once described to me the first time God ever spoke to him, the experience his faith stands on. His first child had just been delivered, and the doctors arrived with the worst news there is. The baby needed a procedure to live, and the procedure cost more than he had or would ever have, the kind of number that ruins lives. He prayed. And God answered as clearly as any voice he has ever heard, and what God said was that it was all right. That he understood. That the child could be allowed to die and that is exactly what he did. This has sat with me ever since. Out of everything an infinite mind might say over a dying newborn, the voice said the one sentence his terror needed. It arrived at the exact peak of the load, shaped like the load, carrying permission, and he received it as the realest moment of his life, and I believe him that it felt that way. That is what it looks like when the apparatus does triage. The belief that discharges the unbearable arrived, and it presented itself as the voice of God.

Every believer already grants all of this, for every voice except one. The rival prophet's angel was a deception. The other religion's visitation was grief. The man on the

sidewalk talking to aliens is ill and needs help. He sorts confidently, and by his own sorting the vast majority of divine encounters in human history are malfunctions, since they cannot all be right and mostly contradict his. Beliefs built by these pressures point in incompatible directions, which is precisely what you would expect from pressure. So the phenomenon itself, certainty arriving as a voice, is, by everyone's accounting including his, overwhelmingly a product of the room. He asks me to file exactly one exception. His.

I cannot. There is no instrument, in his hands or mine or anyone's, that stands between a grief response, a coping mechanism, a misfiring illness, and a genuine transmission, and tells them apart, because any instrument brought to the sorting is the same apparatus that manufactures all four. A signal that cannot be told from its own counterfeits is not a signal a life can be spent on. If I honored one voice I would have no grounds for refusing any and my belief would simply go to whichever counterfeit reached me first at sufficient volume. People are asking me to be frivolous with the only thing I can attest to, on the word of a category of experience that

everyone, believers first among them, agrees is nearly always the machine talking to itself.

But what about the apologetic arguments, the believer asks. Something must have caused all this. Look at the order, the fine structure, the perfect constants. There must be a ground. There must be a necessary being under all the contingent ones.

Cause. An instrument forged in the room for room-work. It names a pattern in the render, this arriving after that, reliably, billiard balls and dominoes, and it has never once been observed doing anything else, because observation is the render. The argument picks up this intramural tool and swings it at the wall, demanding a cause of the whole room, of causation itself, and the word comes apart in the swing. Strip away the arrivals and the afters and there is nothing left of it to mean anything.

A universe this finely tuned, the constants landing on the narrow values that permit us, must have been aimed because the alternative was too improbable to happen. But probability is a room instrument like the rest. It runs on trials. I can tell you the odds on a die because dice get rolled, in bulk, on tables, and the record accumulates. For

the room itself there is no record. One roll, no table, no stack of other universes to count against, and a probability with no record behind it is a dial with no scale on it. Improbable compared to what? A puddle waking in a pothole would marvel at a hole shaped so precisely to its own edges that someone must have dug it on purpose. The water took the shape of the hole. We took the shape of the room. The fit is what filling looks like from the inside. Every argument of this kind swings the same inside tool at the same wall and connects with nothing.

You cannot even reason without God, a bolder believer says. Logic, the stability of nature, the trust you put in your own mind, all of it needs a divine ground, so every argument you aim at him is borrowed from him. Logic is a pattern the render has never broken. Contradiction never cashes out in experience, so I rely on it the way I rely on the floor, and neither has failed me yet. Nature holding steady is the same, a regularity I have watched hold and expect to keep holding. These are the plainest facts I have, and they work in every house that never heard God's name.

And what is offered as their ground? A mind, enlarged, built from the same parts as everything else in here, whose own reliability would then need a ground by the same rule. The demand for a foundation under the foundation either stops somewhere or runs forever, and the believer just decides it stops at his word. That settles nothing. The floor held before the word arrived, and it will hold tomorrow on the terms it holds today, which are the only terms there are.

The heaviest case ever made to me came from the friend I mentioned earlier, after his conversion. Nothing moves unless moved. No chain of the contingent hangs from nothing. Follow the borrowing of existence back far enough and you must arrive at something that does not borrow. He built it slowly and honestly and it is a genuinely beautiful object, and I told him so, and then I asked him where the last step happens. Every link in his chain was forged in the render. Motion, dependence, arrival, all of it. The argument climbs its ladder flawlessly and then, at the top rung, steps off sideways into a direction that was never in the room.

The thing at the top cannot be another mover. That is the whole point of it. If it were moved, or caused, or borrowed anything, the chain would run right past it and keep going, so it has to be unlike every link that led there. Unmoved. Uncaused. Owing nothing to anything. Every one of those is a subtraction, and there is nothing left over. The climb is fine. He gets exactly where he said he would go, and what is standing there is described only by what it is not. Run this honestly and the analogical God is a stack of subtracted comparisons.

Some believers saw all of this long ago. God is not a being among beings, they said. Not an object, beyond every category, beyond existence itself as we mean it. Every concept fails, every image is idolatry, we can say only what he is not. They audited the assembly, found the vacancy, published it, and kept the liturgy. Kept the robes, the obedience, the moral jurisdiction, the institution, all of it now aimed at an admitted blank. If your god is beyond concepts, then your worship is aimed at the gap between your own words. That is not depth.

A modern believer hears all of this and says fine, we live in a build. Then who runs the build? Your room implies a landlord. That is God.

The room does not imply a landlord. A landlord you can characterize is furniture. The room cannot even form the lease.

Imagine a being living on a flat page, two dimensions, no thickness, no up or down. A solid being above the page would be beyond its every concept and could still reach down and touch its world. Let the solid being push a finger through the page. What the flat one meets is a circle, arriving, growing, gone, and nothing about the circle says finger. It is flat weather like all his other weather, and he has no way, even in principle, to sort the visitation from an ordinary day. Now ask the flat being to conceive the third dimension. He can push his marks around, write depth and mean it, stack his two directions and call the stack new, and every figure he draws lies flat on the page, because the page is what he draws with. Suppose the depth-talk forecasts that the circles arrive on schedule. Then he has a third direction honestly, the way we have an electron, and good for him. He still has no

outside. One more direction is not an outside. It is more room, another axis of the same stock, and the solid being is a creature, a larger resident of a larger page, exactly the big alien nobody worships.

And when all else has failed, there is the fallback, the offer made to me more times than I can count. You lose nothing by believing, and stand to gain everything, so believe, or try to, as though belief were a choice I could make like what to eat for dinner.

Try it now. Pick something you know is false and believe it. Believe, sincerely, that Santa is real again, the way you believed at five. Put everything on it. Nothing moves, because conviction is not a muscle. It is a click that happens to you or does not. I believe my house is standing right now. I cannot see it, and every model I own votes that it is. If my wife texts me that it burned down, the belief flips in the time it takes to read the message. That is not a choice. She would not joke about this, my phone is unlikely to be lying, and the click happens to me. That is what being convinced is. The model updates, and my consent is never once requested. So the wager asks for the one thing I cannot choose, or

else for the practice that would manufacture it, and asks it for a God who, on the believer's own doctrine, reads hearts and screens for counterfeits.

The stakes could not be higher. The believer prices belief at some Sundays, some tithes, a few pleasures foregone, cheap insurance. Count again. What is actually pushed onto the table is the life. The single item in all the world that does not need verifying against an outside because it is the verifying, the room's own light, the fact that anything is showing up at all. That is all there is, and the wager proposes to spend it on a sentence too broken to even be doubted. Everything to lose. The only thing that was ever yours to lose. Handed over, at the window of a teller who cannot say what he is selling.

This has been proposed to me on porches, in parking lots, in long messages sent at midnight. The pitch has softened over the years into its final form. Just read it again, just pray, what could it cost you? The people who love me offer it gently, and the gentleness tells me everything. Nobody soft-sells a thing they believe is life or death.

4. The Readings

Hand ten strangers ten thermometers and one pot of water. If the instruments work, the readings crowd together. Ninety-nine point six. A hundred point one. Ninety-nine point nine. The crowding is what measurement looks like. And if one thermometer comes back reading twelve, you do not found a school of twelve-ism. You throw the instrument away.

Now run the experiment the religions claim to have been running for thousands of years. One God, they say, or at least one truth. Real channels open to it, revelation, encounter, reason. Thousands of cultures, each holding the instrument up, each reading it in total sincerity, many of them willing to die for the number on the dial.

Read the dials side by side.

One God. Many gods. No god, but an impersonal law that punishes and rewards. A god who is three and one. A god who demands the foreskin of every male infant. A god to whom the practice means nothing. Meat that damns you, meat that is commanded, days on which work is holy, the same days on which work is defilement. An afterlife of bodies resurrected, an afterlife of bodiless bliss, a wheel of rebirth to be escaped. He had a son. To say he had a son is the one unforgivable sentence. Same claimed instrument. Same claimed target. Readings that contradict, at the level of who, what, how many, and what he wants done with your one life.

The others are misreading, the believer says. Only his channel is clean. Now count how many times that answer is being given, right now, in absolute sincerity, in every direction at once. Every tradition runs the same audit and every audit acquits the auditor. The method for detecting a corrupted channel is the channel under investigation. There is no independent line to check against, no reading of the pot that does not come off somebody's contested dial. It is thermometers all the way

down, each certifying itself, each reading twelve in its own direction, each throwing the others away.

Real instruments converge as they improve. The shape of the earth, the speed of light, the age of the rocks and trees. Rivals measured those, enemies even, across centuries and hostile borders, and the numbers marched together decade by decade until the argument simply ended, because that is what happens when something is actually being measured. Now watch revelation across the same centuries. It does not converge. It splinters. Every reformation announces the original signal recovered at last, and delivers another denomination. The channels multiply, thousands upon thousands within one tradition alone, each new sect a fresh certificate. Five thousand years of readings and the spread is wider than when it started.

The Methodist church I grew up in shared a parking lot with a Baptist church. Two congregations of the same religion, close enough to hear each other's music. And on youth nights we would load into a van and drive across town to play kickball against another Methodist church, because between the two buildings touching at the curb

there was no relationship at all. When I asked why, the answer explained nothing. Well, they are Baptists. One week, feeling rebellious, I took a friend and simply walked into the Baptist youth group instead. The room looked exactly like ours. Same folding chairs, same kind of laughing before the leader called things to order. I do not remember one thing anybody said, and I remember exactly how it felt to stand in the doorway, like walking in wearing a coat that did not belong to me. Nobody was unkind. Nobody had to be. It remains one of the stranger mornings of my childhood, a room of kids my age, my town, my scripture, and I might as well have crossed a border into another country.

Disagreement is not the problem. Honest instruments disagree at the margins. Disagreement that never narrows, that widens with every improvement in communication, that organizes into armies and burns the other lab down, that is the sign of no measurement.

If theism is contact, if even one channel actually crosses, certain things follow. Content should converge, at least along the working channel. Revelation should carry real cargo, some fact arriving as if from past the wall

that the receiver could not have packed himself. Belief should sit loose to geography, the way the boiling point of water does, discovered everywhere roughly alike because it is out there to be found. And the phenomena should hold up under better instruments, the way real phenomena do, standing firmer the harder you look.

If theism is the room scavenging itself, the forecast inverts. Shapes should converge and contents collide, one parts bin, many assemblies. Every revelation should arrive in the receiver's own language, dressed in his own century, knowing exactly as much as he knows. Belief should ride birthplace the way accent does. And the phenomena should thin wherever the recording improves.

Now look outside.

Belief obeys geography like cuisine. Born in Riyadh, and the one true God turns out to be the one preached in Riyadh. Born in Tuscaloosa, and he turns out, what are the odds, to be Tuscaloosa's. The Ganges delta reliably produces one eternal truth, the Irish coast another, and everyone participating treats this as unremarkable, though it is the single most remarkable fact in the whole

domain. Truths about the room do not behave this way. Water boils at the same temperature in Riyadh and Tuscaloosa, and nobody inherits math from their grandmother. The pattern of belief is the pattern of transmission, wombs and lullabies and neighborhoods, which is exactly the distribution of a thing made in here, and no distribution at all for a thing found out there.

The one true God, in my case, happened to be the one preached within driving distance of my parents' house. The odds of that did not land on me until the Army, standing in a bay of eighteen-year-olds from everywhere, every bunk issued its own absolute. The kid from Utah had the true church. The kid from Georgia had it. The kid from Michigan had a different denomination of it, and the quiet one by the door had no god at all and a hometown that explained that too. Every one of them was wearing the label of a birthplace.

The scriptures are documents claiming authorship, or at least dictation, from past the wall, where everything is known. Thrones, in the centuries of thrones. Shepherds and vineyards where sheep and grapes were money. Cosmologies exactly as tall as the era's tallest guess,

firmaments and crystal tiers, and never once, in any tradition, on any continent, a single item the receiver could not have packed. No microbe, before the microscope. No galaxy, before the telescope. Nothing about the other side of the receiver's own ocean. Each revelation knows precisely what its century knows, hopes what its village hopes, hates whom its author hates, and stops dead at the edge of local knowledge. The dictation from beyond all maps never seems to correct the map.

For most of history the gods lived in the world and had jobs. The storm was one. The sea was one. So was death. They had mountains you could point at, houses you could visit, appetites you could feed. Nobody needed a word like transcendent, because nobody was claiming it. Even the most popular god of today started out with company. His oldest stories have him strolling gardens, smelling the smoke, jealous of rivals, and you do not command a people to put no other gods before you in an empty field.

Then the jobs started disappearing. The storm turned out to be pressure and heat. The sea got charts. The harvest got chemistry, and one by one the gods were let

go from posts that no longer existed. Up the mountain, until somebody climbed it. Into the sky, until somebody mapped it. Past the firmament, until the firmament fell. Seas parted, suns halted, the dead walked, when the witness pool was a handful of the devout with only their memory to report.

Both retreated the same way, into the gaps, the unfilmed village, the uncontrolled anecdote, the tumor that regressed as tumors occasionally do, until there was one position left that nobody could ever check and one kind of evidence left that nobody could ever verify. Outside space. Beyond time. No part of anything. Billions of pockets now hold a camera that never blinks, and the age of public marvels quietly closed the day the recording started.

The finished product is no Superman. The strongest being in the world is still in the world, one more resident with better powers, findable in principle, too small for the job. Not everyone accepted that math. The Mormons kept the older model, a god with a body, once a man, who came to his post along the same road they intend to travel and lives, by their own scriptures, near a

named star. That is a god you could go looking for, and notice what the traditions that made the move call it. Blasphemy. A god too small.

Prayer is the one place even the large god stays checkable. Somebody asks, and something either happens or it does not. Except nobody can say what a yes is even supposed to look like. Does the asking change what he was going to do, or was he always going to do it and he just enjoyed hearing the asking? Ask ten believers and you get ten answers, delivered with equal confidence, and every one of them ends in the same place, in a shrug called mystery, his reasons are his own, it is not for us to know. Sort the answered from the unanswered across any congregation and you have re-derived the base rate.

The framed prayer by my bed went out every night like a report, and the days sorted themselves into answers afterward. The test I passed was God. The test I failed was me not praying hard enough. The fish that died anyway was its time to go.

Comfort, someone will say. It works, it heals, it holds families together, surely that counts for something. It does. Prayer calming you proves that prayer calms you,

the way a placebo works exactly as well as a sugar pill, which is to say it works, on the part of you that was never sick from lack of sugar.

Every single reading lands where the room predicts and not one lands where contact predicts. The world was already here, wearing exactly this weather, and it has been wearing it in plain sight for the whole recorded run. The frame does not strain to explain the religious world. It expects it, down to the denominational schisms and the period costumes and the miracle that always happened one village over.

The hiddenness is deliberate, the believer says. God stays out of the instruments on purpose, because faith must be free, because proof would compel. This grants every reading on the page and then explains them with a story built so that nothing could ever count against it. A theory that predicts exactly what its own absence would predict was never a theory to begin with. What would count as an error for this believer? I can say what would count for me. A claim that forms, or a model of mine that stops working. If his answer is nothing, then nothing is being tracked.

Then why this fiction, of all fictions? If nothing is being measured, why does every culture's needle swing to the same few symbols? The apparatus watches for things that might be alive, and it runs hot, because the two mistakes are priced differently. The rustle in the grass that was only wind costs you a flinch. The wind that was actually a predator costs you everything. So it fires early and often and has never stopped firing. You feel it nightly, the face in the wallpaper, the presence in the dark hall, the sense that the thunder is angry.

You have thanked a car that started on the third try. You have called a hurricane cruel and meant it a little. People name boats and apologize to chairs they walk into. Two dots and a line is a face. Anything that moves on its own has a reason for moving. We hold one template for a cause with intentions in it, and the template is a person, because a person is the only thing any of us has ever been.

You began life in a world that was, functionally, a giant. It fed you or you starved. It watched, judged, comforted, punished, and all of this stamped itself in before you owned a single word to examine it with. The first world every person inhabits is a personal one, ruled

by vast beings whose favor is life. That mold does not dissolve at adulthood. It sits in the stock, poured and set, and when the grown mind reaches for a shape to hang the universe on, the mold is right there, pre-fitted. Of course the far side of the wall has a face. It is the first face.

People who lived under kings needed no instruction in what power looks like from below, the court, the decree, the mercy that must be begged for. The architecture of heaven, in tradition after tradition, is the architecture of the local palace. The room furnished its beyond with its politics, because politics was the stock it had.

In the Army power ran in one direction and between me and the highest authority stood a ladder of intercessors, each addressed in the correct form, each holding delegated wrath and delegated mercy. You did not go to the top with a request. You went to the sergeant, the way you went to the pastor. I remember standing in formation one morning thinking that heaven, as it had been issued to me in childhood, was exactly this, a chain of command with the ceiling

removed, and that whoever first drew that heaven had been standing in a formation of his own.

Try to imagine your own nonexistence. You will produce a darkness, with you floating in it, watching. A silence, with you there, hearing it. The apparatus cannot build a scene from which its own point of view is deleted, because the point of view is what everything else gets painted on, and this permanent failure gets misread as a preview. It feels like a continuation because the render of an ending keeps including the renderer. Out of that misreading, the afterlife, in all its regional costumes, and out of the terror underneath it, every deathbed conversion there has ever been.

Death got close for the first time at a viewing when I was small, a casket at exactly my eye level, an old relative rendered wrong, waxier than the version of her I carried. That night I ran the experiment every child eventually runs. I tried to be dead in my head, really tried, and produced a darkness with me floating in it, then a silence with me listening to it, then the lid of a box with me behind my own closed eyes, present at my own absence. I could not do it. Nobody can do it. I concluded, the way

everyone concludes, that I had glimpsed what comes next, and it looked survivable.

An apparatus that sees someone everywhere, a parent-shaped mold, a throne for furniture, and a hole where death should render. Fill in that machinery and it produces gods. This is why the shapes converge while the contents collide, one species, one parts bin, and it is why I do not sneer at believers. Nobody chose the mold. The people kneeling are running the same equipment as everyone else, under a load nobody consented to, and the ones who sneer at them are running it too, and most of the sneerers have simply moved the throne indoors and renamed it.

Understanding where it came from is not an obligation to kneel to it. A phrase that never formed, produced by machinery that cannot help producing it, would be only a curiosity. Except the phrase commands. It has armies, and revenue, and a claim on your children, and the oldest jurisdiction on earth, the inside of the skull.

5. The Kneeling

Theism sits at the center of the struggle for liberty because it trains the most intimate habit a person can learn. Surrender.

Gratitude toward an author you never consented to. Obedience to terms you never negotiated. A lifelong rehearsal of praise for an arrangement you had no power to refuse, conducted daily, on your knees, in the one theater no inspector ever visits. People talk about freedom as though it lived out there, in courts and ballots and borders, and all the while a far older regime operates inside the skull, where thought is treated as supervised, desire as suspect, doubt as dangerous, worth as conditional, and peace as a substance granted from above.

The regime endures because it resolves anxiety cheaply. Existence, unfurnished, is a lot to carry. Theism answers the questions before they finish forming, assigns purpose without risk, converts uncertainty into duty, and to a mind cornered by its own life, that trade reads as mercy. It relieves the pressure of authorship. I understand the relief. I have felt the relief. But watch what the relief trains, underneath its warmth, repetition by repetition, year by year. Defer first. Obey inwardly. Trust the structure over the self. The posture is the product.

I can still imagine walking through my childhood church. The fluorescent light, the old carpet, the smell of coffee and hymnals, the sound of a whole congregation standing at once. I can sing the camp songs to this day, word for word, and so can the friends I made there, friends I still have. Grace ran before every meal without fail, and saying it was a rite of passage, a three-year-old mumbling a few words he heard his parents say the night before. When someone was sick, meals appeared. When a family needed watching, or counsel, or a floor to stand on, the church was the floor. The mission trips and the

camps are some of the finest memories I own. Kindness was delivered daily, by people who meant it. None of that came from beyond the wall. The meals were cooked by people. The floor was people. The songs are still mine and nobody asked for them back. What the vacancy supplied was the posture the kindness came wearing.

Every regime in history has at least had an occupant. The tyrant existed. You could, in principle, find the palace, name the man, count his soldiers. This one is administered in the name of a sentence that never formed. Children taught to fall asleep afraid of a fire that no concept has ever reached. Men burned in public squares, women drowned, and the charge, read out with full ceremony, was holding the wrong theory of an empty plate. Wars, partitions, massacres, whole libraries of law governing food and dress and love, all of it enforcement, and at the center of the enforcement, where the throne should be, the blank between words.

They were killing over the administration of a syntax error, and they are not done. The fire of hell made its way to me. Some visiting preacher, some other kid at camp with the details, it hardly matters who carried it, because

forever does its own work once it is inside a child. I was afraid of it constantly. I remember a night, eight or nine years old, lying in bed running the math. The duration. A hundred years. A thousand. I got up and said the framed prayer a second time, then once more with better focus. The fear itself felt like evidence of guilt. The product manufactures the anxiety, then sells you the relief, and a child in a dark bedroom cannot audit either one.

A person can flee a country. A person can change jobs, languages, neighborhoods, even names. Every earthly regime, however brutal, leaks at the borders, and the leak is where liberty has always lived. This regime has no border. Its jurisdiction is the inside of your mind and the whole of your time, including the alleged part after your death, and its founding documents are proud of this. A cosmic monarchy offers no exile, no abdication it will recognize, no wilderness outside its writ. The only door it shows you leads further in. Deeper submission, offered as the cure for the ache of submission.

The reward, paradise, is perfected obedience. Endless praise, endless gratitude, the will finally and fully aligned with the administration, forever, with no right of refusal,

and refusal not even wantable, since wanting otherwise was the flaw that paradise cures. A cell where the lights never go off and the prisoner's mind has been renovated into loving it. That is the prize. That is what the training was for. Eternity as the completed kneel.

The regime recruits your relationships as enforcement. Approval becomes conditional. Doubt becomes betrayal. Belonging becomes a leash, and the cost of honesty rises with every person you love, until the truth in your mouth would price you out of your own family's table. Plenty of pews are filled with people who quietly saw the empty plate years ago and keep eating the air, because the alternative is exile from everyone they have.

By high school my own youth group carried open atheists, kids who had grown up in those rooms and kept coming every week anyway, because the belonging was real long after the belief was gone, and nobody could afford to say which one the attendance was for. At the time they seemed foreign to me, almost impossible. Until I was sixteen I thought the word atheist meant someone

who worshiped the devil. That is how sealed the room was.

The adults of my family believe and the believing is load-bearing. My siblings seem to be drifting the way I did, thankfully. My colleagues, my neighbors, men I respect, believers, many of them deeply. Everyone knows where I stand, because I have been open about it for years. At Christmas services I stand and sit on cue in a pew with people I love, inside an understanding nobody voices, that Dylan believes none of this, and the candlelight is lovely anyway. Nobody asks me to say grace anymore. And when death is in the room and someone asks through tears whether they are in a better place, I say the kind thing. Kindness costs me nothing but the argument, which was never going to be won there anyway.

By the accounting they profess, I am headed somewhere unspeakable, the man they eat Thanksgiving with, and the alarm never sounds. No interventions, no tears over my soul, a Bible handed across once in a while with a shrug attached. I notice the calm. If I believed a

man I loved was walking toward a cliff in the dark, I would not hand him a pamphlet about cliffs.

Understand this, and you understand the revival being sold everywhere right now, the manly resurgence, the return to order, faith marketed as the cure for chaos. The pitch lands because the wounds are real. People are exhausted, ground by feeds that farm their attention, priced out of futures, unseen, unneeded, mocked from above, and when predictability collapses, minds reach for a parent, a story with an ending, a tribe that moves as one. Hand over your uncertainty, receive certainty. Hand over your solitude, receive a crowd. Hand over your authorship, receive instructions. What is being offered is a leash, gilded, blessed, fitted with a reassuring smile.

I watch it arrive daily now, through the feeds, wearing its new uniform. Iron and incense. Gym mirrors and Gothic fonts. Young men announcing their conversions in testimony threads. They give their reasons out loud. I was tired of deciding everything myself. I wanted my kids raised inside something. I needed an operating system. One convert I half know wrote that he did not even fully believe yet, but he had started attending because his life

needed a spine, and countless replies called it the most honest thing they had ever read.

I see the pull. I am not above it. Order feels like fresh air when your life is crowding you, and certainty feels safer than responsibility, and a supervising gaze feels comforting to anyone trained young to distrust their own solitude. The bargain hands you a prepackaged purpose and takes, as payment, your right to invent one. It offers absolution and keeps you small, and it prices your smallness as humility, and it stamps the receipt with the name of a thing no mind has ever managed to think.

The struggle for liberty begins farther in than any politics reaches, because every external tyrant harvests a crop he did not plant. A mind trained to kneel is pre-conquered. It arrives at every future demand for submission with the posture already rehearsed, the reverence installed and idling, waiting only for a new object. Strip a population of its god without touching its training, and within a generation it is kneeling to a party, a leader, a race, a cause, some new tenant in the old throne room, because the throne room was the problem in the first place.

Throwing off theism, actually throwing it off, down at the level of reflex, matters beyond religion. It is rehearsal space for freedom itself. The first authority you evict from the inside of your own skull teaches you the moves for every authority after it, and the moves, it turns out, are learnable. A mind that demands the concept be formed before the kneel, that protects its doubt like a tool, that keeps its dignity intact in the presence of the sacred, becomes expensive to govern. Fear needs a believed hell. Shame needs a believed watcher. Cheap rule needs the training, and the training can be refused.

Tear out the internalized authority and leave the space empty, and the space will advertise itself. Some new abstraction will be measuring the room within the week, and the feeds are full of applicants. What follows the eviction is the harder art, and it begins in a silence.

When the voice that answers everything goes quiet, the silence is loud. You keep listening for the answer out of pure habit, and none comes, and the no-answer sits there, day after day, unbearable at first, and this is the moment the marketers of every creed are waiting for, the relapse window. Wait inside it. The silence is not a

verdict. What stirs in it, slowly, awkwardly, is your own agency taking shape, raw, unsupervised, and yours, and there is no map for what it builds, and the missing map is the point. Existence ships with no instruction manual. That blankness is the workshop.

Mine went slowly.

A new youth pastor arrived in middle school, and one of his first acts was to retire the Bible we had always used. There were problematic passages in it, he said, and a better translation would replace it. We rebelled the way middle schoolers rebel, sneaking the old contraband Bible into class behind his back. But something had already slipped. They were both Bibles. If the old one was flawed enough to pull from the shelves, what exactly had we been absorbing all those years, and what certified the new one? Perfection, it turned out, had editions.

In high school, my girlfriend at the time did not believe, and one evening we walked past a street preacher working the corner, and she turned to me and asked, flat and genuinely curious, Dylan, am I going to hell? And I said yes. Because that was the doctrine, and I was being honest. This girl I loved the way you love at that age was

headed to conscious eternal torment, the place I had been afraid of my whole life, for declining a premise. I did not sleep well over it. I told myself that a belief with stakes like that deserved good reasons, and I went looking for mine, and the search kept coming back empty.

Then I started college, and the same childhood friend, an atheist at the time, and I talked for hours, past the point of defending and into the point of actually looking. He handed me writers I had never been permitted to know existed. Not one of them converted me to anything. What they did was worse. They showed me the question had more than one available answer, which was itself the forbidden information.

Somewhere in that stretch I prayed the last real prayer of my life. I was alone, and I could feel the whole structure going translucent, and I asked, as directly and desperately as I have ever asked for anything, I feel like I am losing you. Help me not lose you. And I was met with the silence I had been trained to read as a test. I sat inside it for a long time, and for the first time I let it be what it was.

So I stopped going. And the hole the church had occupied did not close politely behind it. It ached, and the ache made me a customer, and the friendliest salesmen in America found me almost immediately.

A friend brought me to the Mormons. They were warm in a way that felt engineered by someone who understood what a lonely deconvert is missing. And their product answered, point by point, the frictions that had cracked my first faith. Bothered by ten thousand quarreling denominations? Here is the one true church, restored. Bothered by translations and retired Bibles? Here is a book they called perfect and unchanged. Terrified since childhood of hell? Their hell sat nearly unpopulated, reserved for those who see God and fight him anyway, and everyone else got further chances, tiers, mercy running past the grave, even for the billions who never once heard the name. Every splinter I had carried out of my first church had been anticipated and sanded smooth. I was baptized again, a fresh adult in a new font. For a while the hole felt fed.

My family hated it. They called it a cult, with a confidence I found fascinating even then, since most of

their charges against it were charges I could have read back to them. My father spent weeks researching the church and assembled a packet meant to dismantle it. Printouts, histories, contradictions, the whole case. It hurt. I did not read it. I carried it, sealed, to the missionaries. They were nineteen, boys in ties, a year off their own parents' floors.

They did not read it either. They sat me down, and one of them asked, gently, how do you feel when your father shows you these things? Bad, I said. I do not like it. And how do you feel when you come here, when you are with us? I feel great, I said. I love it here. And he nodded and said, then that is all you need. He was reciting. Somebody had handed him that question and he was handing it to me.

And it was all I needed. For months. Because I wanted it to be, and I watched myself want it. The packet stayed sealed. The feeling stood guard over the belief, exactly as it does.

The end came quietly. My doubts kept arriving, and I kept catching myself running the missionaries' maneuver on them. But how does it feel, I would answer myself,

and one night I finally saw the maneuver for what it is. An instrument being asked to certify itself. The reader reading the reader. The whole apparatus went visible at once, my first church and my second, the Cry Nights and the sealed packet and the framed prayer by the bed, one machine in different vestments, and there was nothing left standing in front of it to defend.

I said it out loud alone in my car in a parking lot. I do not believe any of this. Nothing happened. The radio kept playing. The world declined to end, and the not ending was the loudest thing I have ever heard.

The anger came next and stayed for years. I felt lied to from the crib up, and I went after believers aggressively, which I regret in style if not entirely in substance. The Army absorbed most of that heat. In Advanced Individual Training they had us on a short leash with long evenings, almost nothing permitted and hours to fill, and a barracks full of young men from every corner of the country would not sit quietly in those conditions. So we argued. Religion and politics, daily, at full volume, often in class, and I took the unbeliever's corner every time. Months of defending a position against people

raised inside every denomination on the map, with nowhere for anyone to go, did more to sharpen me than any book I had read. When the anger burned down there was the long rest of the unknown, and then the last step, and then, finally, the silence.

The silence was the hard part and the honest part. The reflexes kept firing long after the tenant left. Prayers starting themselves on turbulent flights. Guilt on Sunday mornings. A thank you forming with no one at the end of it. And the fear of hell. I let each one run and watched it, stock twitching in the inventory.

Meaning, after the eviction, becomes an art. Build it with craft, with competence that leaves marks in the world. Build it with friendships that survive honest speech. Build it with a body that can carry its own weight and a mind that respects evidence even when the evidence bites. Write your own rituals instead of renting them. Guard your attention. It is the only thing you actually spend. Help strangers because you prefer living in a world where that happens, and your preference, finally, is allowed to be a reason. Honesty is telling the truth while your own team boos. Courage is acting with

the fear still in the room. Justice is treating other minds as sovereign, which is the treatment the old regime denied to yours.

Keep whatever was precious. The music taught reverence. Keep the reverence and aim it at what shows up, at the render itself. The stories taught care for the weak. Keep the care, you remember being weak. The community taught hospitality. Keep the doors open. What changes is the source. These become choices, made in the open, revocable, examined, and a kept lesson with the source changed is more yours than it ever was under threat of fire. You can love a tradition and deny it jurisdiction. You can honor your ancestors without letting them vote on your future.

Some people cannot build meaning without religion, the argument goes, so the rest of us should keep the whole structure standing for their sake. I do not buy it. Millions filed as moral minors, and the filing is always done by someone who has exempted himself. People keep promises, learn a craft, raise children, nurse a parent at two in the morning, and tell the truth when it costs them, with no priest signing off on any of it. The raw

material was always here. Attention, reciprocity, competence, love. There is no underclass of souls built for obedience. Give people tools, not handlers.

Community without cages is buildable, harder, slower, but buildable. Associations entered by consent, held by trust instead of hostages, dissolvable the day they stop serving the people inside them. Begin with your own personhood and then ally with others who insist on the same, and be patient, because structures like that are built one honest friendship at a time and the old cathedrals had a two-thousand-year head start.

The armored believer walking through fire makes a better poster, I know. It dazzles. It is also a costume. Stand without a book to hide behind, without a tribe to punish your doubters, without a manager in the sky signing off on your desires. Think your own thoughts. Refuse the outsourcing of your one interior life to a bureaucracy no concept has ever reached.

6. The Room, Known

I was asked what it would take for me to believe, and the honest answer is that the question never assembles. So here is what it is like to live on this side of that finding, since the rumor is that it is bleak.

I will die in this room. So will you. I will die without seeing a new color. Every love I have felt was rendered, every friend arrived as signal and was rebuilt in the dark of my skull, every word here was assembled from stock, including the word stock, including this sentence, and none of that has ever once made the coffee taste like a model. The render is not diminished by being a render. It is the only place anything has ever tasted like anything.

The difference between the believer and me was never the room. He is in here too. Every hymn he has ever sung,

he sang in here. Every presence that ever descended on him descended in here. His heaven, his hell, his whole tremendous elsewhere, all of it in-house, painted on the same walls mine are. The difference is that I know it is a room. That is the entire distance between us, and it is the widest distance there is, because everything follows from it. He spends the one attested thing, the single item in the universe that ever actually showed up, on the maintenance of a phrase, and he has been taught to call my refusal pride.

Let it be pride, then. I own one life. One run of this render, unrepeatable, arriving moment by moment out of the dark and gone the same way, and it is the only object in all the world whose existence needs no verifying, because it is the verifying. Everything else I hold provisionally, models on truce, graded by the weather, revisable by morning.

And I decline, finally and completely, to spend it on the far side of the wall. Not because I have surveyed the far side and found it empty. There is no conceivable far side to survey and no emptiness to report, there is only a phrase, worn smooth by a hundred generations of

mouths, and I am done pretending the smoothness is a meaning. I will not tithe my hours to it. I will not bend my one interior life into its posture. I will not hand over my doubt. And when the fear comes at night, and it comes, death refusing to render, the old mold aching for its giant, I will not read the ache as evidence.

It found me last month, somewhere past three, the old duration math starting itself in the dark. I got up, drank water at the sink, stood a minute listening to my wife breathe, and got back in. That was the whole liturgy. It was enough.

What remains is not the void the pulpits promised. What remains is a room, small, lit, and mine, with weather worth predicting and work worth doing and people in it whose renders of me are the only afterlife I will ever have, and the only one that was ever worth wanting. Build in here. Love in here, at full weight, more weight, not less, since nothing is being saved for later. Make the meaning by hand, sign it, and stop apologizing for the signature.

The prayer stayed in its frame beside my bed until I left that house. A rectangle hung on a wall at the height of

a child's eyes, with something better on the other side of it, and every night I said the words at it. It was the closest thing to a window that room ever had.

There is no window. There was never going to be a window. Stop scratching at the wall and turn around and look at what the light is falling on.

The room holds.

Hold it back.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

The text is set in EB Garamond, drawn from a specimen sheet printed at Frankfurt in 1592, thirty years after Claude Garamont was buried. No original of his hand survives to check it against.

What you have been reading as his letters is a reconstruction, assembled from an impression of an impression, with nothing behind it to consult.